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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 001779

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC, EUR/PGI
ROME PASS TO US/FAO FOR AMBASSADOR VASQUEZ

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [CASC](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: UPDATE ON AVIAN INFLUENZA

11. (SBU) Summary: While initial GOAJ testing of dead birds from the southern region of Jalalibad did not indicate avian influenza (AI), a visiting USAID technical advisor and FAO representative who visited the region are concerned that the GOAJ test results were inconsistent with the high mortality rate of the birds. After the Ambassador solicited President Aliyev's commitment to order the samples sent to England for international testing December 5 State Veterinary Service Chairman Hasanov gave permission to send the samples to the United Kingdom's Weybridge laboratory, which the Embassy is coordinating with the FAO. While the GOAJ has made some progress raising awareness of AI, bureaucratic resistance in the Veterinary Services to early international testing is worrisome. There are additional reports of bird deaths in Azerbaijan. We continue to urge the GOAJ to establish and early pattern of regular international testing; we also are working with other donors to coordinate an international response, and are holding regular meetings in-house and with the broader Amcit community to discuss AI preparedness. We urge Washington to press the UN system, especially FAO, to engage regularly at a senior level with the GOAJ in anticipation of further problems. End Summary.

Experts Urge Sending Samples to Weybridge

12. (U) Based on concerns from an initial interview with a farmer from the southern region of Jalalibad, visiting USAID technical advisor Elizabeth Krushinskie and Azerbaijan Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) representative Gholam Kiani traveled to Tezekend for a site visit December 2. Three weeks ago the media reported bird die-offs in Tezekend village in the southern region of Jalalibad. In a November 10 meeting with econoff, the State Veterinary Service (SVS) and Ministry of Health described "limited bird deaths" and reported that the GOAJ had conducted testing of dead birds. Krushinskie said anecdotes from the farmers about the high mortality rate for chickens and turkeys could indicate that the GOAJ's explanations from previous testing could have been mistaken. (Note: The State Veterinary Service had collected tissue samples from dead birds three weeks ago for testing. After testing at the Central Veterinary Laboratory in Baku, they reported staphylococcus, colibacillosis and pasteurellosis as the causative agents; the tests were negative for avian influenza. No samples were taken from live birds, geese, or ducks, nor were samples sent abroad since the HPAI PCR tests were negative.)

13. (U) Krushinskie and Kiani gathered two sets of diagnostic

samples from surviving ducks and geese in the village to test for avian influenza. The experts recommended that one set of samples be tested at the Central Veterinary Laboratory while the second be sent to the international reference laboratory in Weybridge, England to be simultaneously tested. (Note: While ducks and geese are asymptomatic, they are carriers of the disease and would show a buildup of anti-bodies if they had been exposed.)

¶4. (SBU) Both Krushinskii and Econoff separately contacted State Veterinary Service (SVS) Chairman Ismail Hasanov December 4, urging him to send the second set of samples to Weybridge and conveying the FAO's offer to pay for the shipment and testing. While conceding to test the samples in Baku, Hasanov refused to send samples to England unless the Baku tests were positive, urging cooperation and trust between the US and GOAJ. Facing delays from the Chairman of Azerbaijan's Avian Influenza Commission Deputy Prime Minister Yagub Eyubov, the Ambassador discussed the issue directly with President Aliyev December 5. She requested that he instruct the SVS to send the samples to Weybridge no later than December 6 (for the testing to be valid) to comply with international norms and help prepare and protect Azerbaijan from a possible avian influenza outbreak. President Aliyev said he would issue the instruction. On December 6, Hasanov told Econoff he gave the veterinary laboratory chief permission to send the samples to Weybridge. The Embassy is coordinating the process with the FAO.

Media Reports Bird Die-offs) GOAJ Says Tests Negative

¶5. (U) A week after Jalalibad appeared in the media, there were reports of dead birds in the central city of Barda, and

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on December 4 the media reported dead birds around Azerbaijan's second largest city Ganja. Following the Jalalibad and Barda reports, Hasanov said the SVS had taken samples and tested for avian influenza. The test results were negative for avian influenza, he said. According to reports from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), Azerbaijan has the technological capability and a small trained staff to test for the H5N1 virus in Baku, as well as field tests to test for avian influenza (although not strain specific) in the regions. Independent contacts working on avian influenza prevention and preparation reported limited deaths of birds around Barda and Jalalibad (around 100 dead birds in each city). UNICEF country representative Hanaa Singer said that testing is underway at the Central Veterinary Laboratory on the Barda samples for Newcastle disease and bacterial disease (like those diagnosed in Jalalibad). The Central Veterinary Laboratory Chief reported that only six birds died in Ganja and the test results have come back negative for avian influenza. The Central Laboratory is conducting further tests to determine the cause of the bird deaths. Pragma, an independent NGO working on the animal side of avian influenza, also confirmed a small number of dead birds and opined that it was not avian influenza.

GOAJ Efforts) A Mixed Bag

¶6. (U) The GOAJ has taken some steps to prevent avian influenza. As SVS Chairman Hasanov told visiting FAS Counselor November 30, "I am sure migrating birds will bring avian influenza to Azerbaijan. We are ready and regional groups are checking up on how our regulations are being implemented." Working closely with international donors, the GOAJ has improved training and equipment for regional hospitals and veterinary laboratories, and designated facilities and staff in Baku. Some NGOs and DTRA have said there has been increased cooperation and significant improvement of the GOAJ's capabilities to fight avian influenza. Peace Corps, medical officer personally visited

the Baku hospitals designated to receive humans suspected of having avian influenza and some regional hospitals and concluded that proper equipment and trained staff were present and prepared.

¶7. (U) The SVS, with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Ecology, has led monthly routine monitoring efforts throughout Azerbaijan, testing migratory birds in the wild and domestic stocks in private farms and poultry plants. The GOAJ reports that all surveillance and monitoring tests were negative for avian influenza. Cooperating with internationally led efforts, the GOAJ has helped increased awareness and information about avian influenza. The media reported that after the bird deaths in Jalalibad, the dead birds were disposed of properly -- burned and buried. In late November, the GOAJ allowed the test results from three human cases in Azerbaijan in the winter/spring of 2006 to be published in medical journals, saying in the media the purpose was to increase awareness and information and help the international community better understand the disease. One NGO working on the issue told Econoff November 25 that Public Service Announcements (PSAs) approved by the GOAJ would appear again this winter, likely the first or second week of December, but UNICEF's Singer said she thought government-sponsored PSAs unlikely. Singer invited the international community to meet December 8 to discuss increasing avian influenza information to the public (through PSAs and informational campaigns) as well as what current and future efforts on avian influenza the international community in Baku should undertake.

¶8. (U) USAID's technical advisor and one NGO said little progress has actually been made in Azerbaijan since the last outbreak. Krushinskie said the SVS did not provide personal protective equipment (PPE) from Baku, saying the regional laboratory would do so. However, Krushinskie said, the regional laboratory did not have even the most basic equipment, the chief regional veterinary did not know that ducks and geese could be carriers of the virus, and he farmers in the village were ill-informed. International Relief and Development country representative Kalyayev told Econoff and visiting FAS Counselor November 30 that he and his staff have seen little progress in regional hospitals and

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that people living in the villages still receive little information.

¶9. (U) In addition to the Ambassador's meetings with President Aliyev and Deputy Prime Minister Eyyubov, Econoff met with Hasanov November 10 to urge him to send independent samples from Jalalibad to the international reference laboratory in England despite the samples having testing negative for avian influenza, stressing the importance of following international norms and increasing the GOAJ's credibility with the Azerbaijani public. Econoff offered to help with shipping and testing costs if that was a concern. Econoff told Hasanov the GOAJ has made significant improvements, but real test would be its reaction in the case of an outbreak.

Embassy's Response

¶10. (U) The Embassy has convened an interagency working group on avian influenza that met September 15, October 12, and most recently December 6 to discuss the current situation in Azerbaijan, GOAJ cooperation, international community coordination, Embassy preparedness, and outreach to the Embassy and American community about avian influenza. The group is chaired by the DCM and includes representatives from the Political and Economic Section, DTRA, Consular, CLO, Med, RSO, USAID, and Peace Corps. The Ambassador met separately with the American and Embassy communities during town hall meetings December 1 to describe the current situation, explain and increase awareness of avian influenza, and share

information about how to prepare in case of possible outbreaks. The Consular Section has been in regular contact with the American community sharing information on avian influenza, preventive measures people can take, and precautionary measures in case of an outbreak.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Comment: With human and bird deaths in early 2006, Azerbaijan is high-risk for another outbreak this fall. Establishing a pattern where the GOAJ sends samples abroad for independent confirmation early is key to containing the spread of avian influenza should it appear in Azerbaijan again. The GOAJ has made some progress since the last outbreak in February, but much remains to be done, especially with regard to increased information and awareness for the public and GOAJ staff. Early resistance in the Veterinary Services to international testing indicates that some officials continue to resist correctly identifying and independently confirming the cases quickly, complicating and slowing down a coordinated response and raising the risk of human exposure to sick birds. Based on the last outbreak and Hasanov's comments to Econoff, January and February might be the most high-risk months for Azerbaijan. We believe the time to work more closely with the GOAJ is now, and while we are encouraged by the GOAJ's decision to send the samples gathered this weekend to England, we will maintain continued high-level engagement on the issue. We ask that Washington urge the FAO to engage regularly with the GOAJ at a senior level now with respect to improving biosecurity and the need for immediate action on bird outbreaks. End Comment.
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